

IN SEARCH OF...

by Joan Lennon

This story originally appeared in Cricket Magazine.

It appears here with the kind permission of the author.

Also appears in **DIARY FROM THE RIM AND OTHER STORIES**

available as an Amazon ebook

“Act your age, Tay!”

Her father was managing (just) to keep his temper, but she knew that wouldn't last.

“You've got to learn there's more to life than floating around with your friends!”

Any minute now, and he'd start really yelling and then slam out of the air lock without sealing it properly. Which meant she and Mum would have to spend the rest of the morning mopping and pumping it out again.

It was all so familiar. She could do entire arguments with her dad on automatic.

Then her mum spoke.

“Tay, this isn't helping. We have something to tell you. Now. Something you need to hear.”

Tay stared. This wasn't part of the routine. Mum usually stayed right out of the quarrels with her dad.

Her mum took a deep breath, then let it go.

“We're going to have another child, Tay,” she said. “When it's born, you know there won't be enough air in the pod for four. You'll have to leave. I... we're sorry.”

There it was—as bald as that.

She'd known this would happen. Of course she did. It happened to *everybody*—and still her knees went weak, and she shivered with a sudden sick chill.

“You don't need to look like that. It's not as if you aren't old enough.” Her father's voice was quiet, almost pleading. “You're fifteen, after all. Your mother and I weren't any older when we left our home pods.”

I don't care! Tay cried silently. *I'm not you—I'm not ready!*

“Forth’s and Eden’s parents have applied formally to us,” said Mum. “Either would make a good mate for you. And there’s always Esk. I could easily speak to his mother about him.”

Mum was still talking, but Tay couldn’t bear to listen anymore. She *wasn’t* stupid. She’d *known* that one of the three boys would be her pod mate. There had never been any other choice. And since Widow Lunan had died, a pod was sitting empty, deactivated waiting for a new couple to start their life there. To start breathing there. The pod membrane system, which extracted oxygen from the surrounding water and expelled carbon dioxide from within, was able to process breathable atmosphere for up to three people. Which had always meant a couple, and one child.

And Tay had *had* her turn being her parents’ baby. It was someone else’s turn to breathe the home air with them, to be the center of their love, to belong. Air. Love. Belonging.

It was all rationed on Planet Rannoch.

“It doesn’t mean we don’t love you,” Mum said quietly, as if she’d heard her daughter’s thoughts. “It just means it’s time for you to move on.”

Suddenly, Tay couldn’t stand it. She couldn’t stand *them*—her parents—with the oh-so-concerned faces and their careful voices and their horrible power. She had to get out. I won’t cry, she told herself. I swear I won’t cry. But she was already sobbing as the air lock sealed. Too late it occurred to her that this was her chance to try Dad’s trick. See how he liked mopping up after *her* for a change.

As the water swirled over her face, she shoved the portable breather into the slot in her throat, hard, so it hurt. Angry and sore, Tay swam away from the pod.

She didn’t know that her mother was watching from the porthole, admiring even then her daughter’s grace and strength, until the glow of her skin disappeared into the dimness. Then with a sigh, Mum turned away.

“Should I...?” Dad let the question trail off as she shook her head sadly.

“Leave her be,” she said. “I remember feeling just the same.”

As she swam past the school, Tay could see the Grouping below hers in class. She let herself drift for a bit, watching, thinking, That used to be me. I used to roll up every day, like them, plug in my audio helmet, listen to Mr. Lomond mauling on... I wonder what they’re doing today?

She kicked a little closer.

It was history.

Every child in the Enclosure was taught history. That was required in the original Charter.

The Charter covered every part of life. It was so old, it had the actual signature of Ensign Leith, the last living member of the starship *Macmillan's* crew. Every child was shown that signature specially. It was spidery, and shaky, and pale. Leith was an old man by then.

There was something a little forlorn about that signature.

Anyway, the Charter held firm, even after all this time, and children were taught the events of Year 0, simply at first, with stories and drawings, and then, as they reached their teens, with the Video.

The Video lasted only few moments. It had survived the crash, when so much data had not, by some fluke that no one understood, and then it had been transferred to equipment developed to operate in seawater and at depth. The school was situated behind the Administration Pod and made use of its outlets to power the audio helmets that allowed teacher and pupils to communicate. Seaweed anchorage kept the pupils more or less in place, and the screen let into the back of the Admin Pod was their blackboard and book.

Tay remembered the day Mr. Lomond had shown *her* Grouping the Video. His voice, as it came over the audio helmets, had been unusually solemn. He began by reminding them of what they already knew.

“When the Survey Starship *Macmillan* first arrived, our sun didn't even have a name. It was only N3317 on the long-range maps. So they decided to call it Beten, after the newest member of the crew, a baby born just as the ship reached the outermost planet. That baby was probably toddling by the time they came to Rannoch, our world. Along the way they would have been surveying each planet from orbit, building up a detailed picture of our solar system, and correcting the inevitable minor mistakes the long-distance chartists had made.

“One of those mistakes, however, turned out to be anything *but* minor.

“The mapmakers had hoped that this system might just be one of the special ones, near enough like the star system that contains Earth. A Class G sun, a collection of gas and rock planets, and in the optimal orbit (not too close to the center star, not too far), a possible place for life. Ninety-nine point nine nine nine systems out of a hundred don't conform—but in a universe as big as this one, that still left some that *did*. Then again, not all of those that *did* had moved beyond the stage of one-celled organisms. But sometimes...

“This time their guess was good. There *was* life on Rannoch, but they didn't realize how dangerous discovering it would prove to be.”

Their teacher paused and then ran the Video.

The screen showed a view from space, from a starship. A planet spread out below like a milky ball. Cloud cover was almost complete, but the occasional break gave tantalizing glimpses of blue.

“What I wouldn’t give for a swim in a sea,” sighed a woman’s voice. She sounded weirdly breathy and she pronounced her words in an odd way, too, but it was still possible to understand her.

“Yeah,” a man answered. “Still, it’s ‘look, don’t touch’ in our line of work. Get it mapped and get in to the next one. If we find life signs, they’ll send a Landable.

The woman grunted. She seemed fed up.

“I can move in for a closer look if you like, though,” the man suggested.

“Yeah. That’d be nice.”

The milky sphere grew until it almost filled the screen.

“Nice,” came the woman’s voice again. “Thanks.”

“H’m. Now, that’s an unusual solar flare,” said the man. “It wasn’t showing up before. You’d better get an analysis of that.”

They heard the woman yawn. The chair creaked, as if she were stretching.

“No thanks. Tell Sam about it. There are exactly two minutes of my shift left, and I’m not starting *anything* that’ll keep me from my bed a second longer.”

The man chuckled. “Fair enough,” he said. “See y—”

And that was where the Video stopped.

“Just like that,” said the teacher to the unusually silent class. “The end of the *Macmillan*.”

The ship had slammed into the shock wave from the solar flare and immediately begun to break up. Two hundred escape pods had launched; less than a hundred made it to the layer of the clouds. They’d ripped through, one by one, heading for the sea below, and the clouds lazily closed up behind them.

“Distress messages were undoubtedly sent out, both from the *Macmillan* at the time of impact and automatically from the escape pods at the moment of ejection. It is believed that the solar storms interfered with their transmission. At any rate, no answer was ever received nor, as far as we know, was any attempt ever made to retrieve the *Macmillan*’s crew.”

Mr. Lomand had looked around at them carefully, she remembered. He must have been worried we’d be a bit freaked. Knowing the story and seeing the Video—well, they weren’t the same thing.

“We now know that, at certain times of a biennial cycle, the solar winds in this system become fierce enough to destroy just about anything smaller than a planet.”

“Even a starship,” murmured Tummel.

Their teacher nodded. “Even a starship. The *Macmillan* arrived at the right place at the wrong time. But, of course, all was not lost.

“Being entirely covered by water meant that surviving on this world was going to be a challenge. It meant that we would have to be adaptable—we would even have to adapt *ourselves*, to work with the basic human design to make it more suited to our new environment. How big a change are we talking about? I have a picture of Ensign Leith’s family, taken on Earth, which he managed to save from the wreck of the starship. He had it with him to the day he died. We understand them to be typical of their kind.”

He’d screened the picture, and Tay grinned to herself as she remembered their reactions.

“But...they’re so UGLY!” exclaimed Carr.

Mr. Lomond had smiled. “The decision to genetically tailor your predecessors for better low-light vision, phosphorescent skin, increased red blood cell count and lung capacity, and integral throat vents for portable breathers was made at the time of the Charter.”

“And the increased physical beauty? Mine, for example?” asked Esk, posing.

“An unforeseen side effect,” the teacher answered dryly.

The class hooted.

“Never mind, Esk, we really just love you for those sexy red blood cells of yours.”

“Sexy *blood cells*? What about these great *pecs*?”

“But look at those people!” Carr was still fixated on the picture. She couldn’t get over it. “Imagine...being pod-mated to something like *that!*”

And it all came flooding back to Tay—what she was swimming away from, the future that she couldn’t escape. She powered off, kicking hard, her strokes fueled by anger and frustration.

She didn’t even know where she was going.

Her mother’s words hammered in her head—*another child...there won’t be room...you’ll have to leave...another child*. She had to get away from that voice.

But where could she go? To the Kinglas’ pod? To the Linnhes’? To Esk’s mum’s? She’d be able to go inside, since the number of people breathing the air in any of their pods would most likely be down to one. Two at the most, depending on which of the grownups were home. She shook her head. None

of her friends were what she needed. Carr and Tummel would just giggle and probably be jealous underneath. Even though they were in her Grouping, they were both a year younger than she was—leaving home was still just a game to them. And Esk, her best friend—how *could* her mother have considered putting his name on her mating list? She didn't even want to *think* about him that way.

It spoiled everything.

With her enhanced eyes, Tay had no difficulty seeing through the dark water. And even if she had been blindfolded, she knew every cubic meter of the great Enclosure, every current pattern and temperature range. She swam past the other living pods and the Medical Facility, past the Nursery where weighed-down babies and toddlers were allowed to explore the rocks and silt of the ocean floor. She passed the Quarry, the Mining quarter, passed the Chemical Distillery and on through the Seaweed Fields.

The Enclosure was situated in the deepest part of Rannoch's unbroken ocean, not far from the thermal vents that warmed and enriched its waters. Sunlight was hundreds of meters away; natural phosphorescence took its place. It was an environment that could have easily have defeated off-worlders, but the new people of Rannoch had refused to be overwhelmed. They'd fought back and won.

Right now, though, the achievement of her ancestors was the last thing on Tay's mind. As she reached the Perimeter, her heart was pounding and her muscles ached, but she wouldn't let up. She didn't even stop to deactivate its electrical field. Passing through felt unpleasant—it made her teeth ache—but the electric charge wasn't lethal to humans. Predators like the snark and the crampon avoided coming in contact with the Perimeter because it was tuned precisely to the frequency of their electrosensors. It scrambled them. Schools of cerring, breen, and the small but delicious chards were unaffected and quickly learned that they could hide within the Enclosure as if in an invisible reef. They were safe from the big fish. Protected.

Tay didn't want to feel protected. She pushed on, right away from the phosphorescent glow of the Enclosure and into the dangerous darkness beyond.

And then, gradually, she came to a stop. She hung in the water, swaying, automatically scanning above, below, 360 degrees around, using all her senses. She'd seen the damage a snark could do. She knew a flense could kill her.

So what was she doing here?

Was this what she was looking for? A quick dance with death before she sat out the rest of her life in a pod with Forth or Eden?

Pretty stupid.

All that surge of emotion was draining away now. She tried to go on feeling angry, and failed. She tried to feel all heated-up and ready for action, which she *should* be, considering where she was. She couldn't even manage that. She had her knife strapped to one arm and an electric prod on the other. They were real against her skin. The danger around was real. Her mum having another child—*that* was real, too. The only thing that *didn't* seem real was Tay, or the Tay she was bound to become...

She was moving upward now on an insistent vertical current. As the pressure changed, Tay's breather automatically adjusted itself to control the balance of nitrogen in her blood. She felt bleak and oddly boneless, knowing that she should be getting back to the Enclosure, yet putting it off. It was actually pretty peaceful, after all the fuss, to just let go, just let herself be moved by the sea. The sea wasn't bothered. It went on forever, round and round the entire world. *It* didn't get frantic about not being the sky. Not that she'd ever seen the sky...

She'd been to the Surface, of course, for picnics with her parents and then on a scientific outing with her Grouping, but it had always been clouds she'd seen those times. Mostly it was the cold she'd noticed about being up so high, and the weirdness of breathing air without walls around her...

It's getting really cold now! she thought suddenly. This is way farther than I'd meant to come—I'd better be heading back.

And then...the net hit.

Sticky filaments glued themselves to her arms and legs. She tried to unsheathe her knife, but it was already too late. She was pinned within a rapidly forming cocoon, spun round and round.

She struggled trying to kick, even bite; the mesh tightened with every movement she made. Even breathing became difficult—and then she was really scared. Scared stiff. Scared still.

A motionless wide-eyed package, Tay felt herself being hauled up, up through the increasingly cold darkness, away from the warmth of her life...

Franck liked his job. He was good at it, too—top of his year at the New Academy of Planetary Surveying and Exploration. His teachers might not have liked him much—too cocky by half, they all thought—but they couldn't bring down his marks!

He had been born on Earth just as the Planets War was finally grinding to a close. His parents, and theirs, stretching back for generations, had always lived in wartime, with all its weight of restriction and fear. Even when they weren't at

a battlefield themselves, they had only to reach for a news-vid or broadsheet to be faced with horrors, near and far. Life was something to be survived, and hope was a fantasy, a private indulgence.

Gloomy, careful folk—that's how they seemed to Franck and his friends. Worthy, of course, and you'd never want to be unkind to them, but, well, things were different now.

The universe was up for grabs.

And to prove it, here he was, on his first solo mission in a solar system that hadn't been visited since before the War. The *Macmillan* had started a survey, had sent back some interesting corrections to the long-range predictions, and then disappeared. Nobody had done anything about sending out a rescue crew. People had been too busy trying to rescue themselves. The start of the Planets War, all those years ago, had put that poor *Macmillan* lot completely off the list.

Oh well. All just history now.

And *this* time, history was not going to repeat itself—not with people like Franck on the job, in search of brave new worlds! Because, really, at its simplest, that was what the Planets War had been about—too many souls, too few square meters of land for them to call their own.

Not that there was a lot of *land* there, but that wouldn't trouble some people...

It certainly didn't trouble his craft. It was an All-Mode Shuttle, one of the new breeds to come out of the War. It had launched from the starship *Nova Scotia*, dropped through the cloud cover, and was now doing an excellent imitation of a boat. It could operate equally well on rock, sand, or mud, though it didn't look as if he'd be getting a chance to test it on anything but sea this time. That simplified navigation, anyway.

Nothing to bump into! he'd thought after splashdown and then got on with acquiring mineral, chemical, plant, and animal specimens to analyze.

Franck hummed to himself as he checked the gauges one more time, altered the navigator half a point, and sauntered out on deck to await the evening haul.

He watched eagerly as the net broke the surface, was lifted overhead by the crane, and deposited carefully onto the deck. Another selection of seaweed. A large, crablike crustacean that waved claws at him irritably.

And a...thing.

He didn't need his qualification in Comparative Biology to suspect it wasn't a fish. Even encased in the netting, it looked more like a mammal: huge, forward-facing eyes, a nose instead of gills, and ... a weird almost mechanical-looking bulge at the front of its throat. And it had skin, not scales.

Silver-blue skin that glowed in the evening light.

“Oh, my,” breathed Franck, leaping back. His knees felt unreliable.

The thing flopped about helplessly, calling out to him in an increasingly strangled voice. *“Please, don’t go—free my hands—I can’t get my breather out—I can’t breathe—”*

Its words were strangely pronounced but understandable, even though Franck had no idea what it was talking about. It was clear, though, that the creature was in distress. The eyes were beginning to roll back in its head, and the color was leaching out of its skin...

Franck lunged forward and started slashing with the shears. Normally he would have approached a job like this calmly and with great care, so as not to damage the specimen before it could be recorded. But normally the specimen didn’t speak to him first.

As soon as its—her—hands were free, she dragged the bulge away from her throat and began to gulp at the air. Franck drew back and studied this most unusual catch from what he hoped was a safe distance.

He saw a long, slender, unquestionably female torso. It was impossible to know for sure what the lower half looked like, since it was still encased in netting, but it almost seemed as if she had a... tail!

“A mermaid!” he murmured in wonder. But the creature shook her head.

“Don’t be stupid,” she panted. “I’m... a human. What are *you*?”

Franck could only stare. The strange accent made it sound as if she’d said she was *human*! His catch frowned at him and tried again.

“I am human,” she repeated very slowly and very carefully. “I will not hurt you. I only want to know what you are. Do you understand me?”

Franck realized his mouth was hanging open.

“Do I understand you?” he croaked. “Of course I do. You’re speaking Universal, though that’s a bit of a weird accent you’ve got there. But I don’t understand what you mean when you say you’re a human. I mean, *I’m* human. That’s the world we use to describe people like me. I mean, I’m from Earth—humans don’t actually look like—”

And then it hit him.

“You *are* human! You’re from the *Macmillan*... You didn’t ...” This time Franck’s knees did give out, and he sat down, hard. “You survived!”

She flicked her wet hair back from her face and smiled, revealing sharp little teeth.

“Of course we did,” she said.

“And no one came to the rescue,” said Franck quietly.

It was sometime later, and Tay had talked herself hoarse.

“No. No one came.” She stared out over the water. “It’s funny, really. I mean, we all *know* the story, but ... the crew of the *Macmillan* never seemed very real. Even after we’d seen the picture and heard them on the Video, it was still just a story. It was O.K. to hear about what happened, and maybe shiver a little. And feel sorry for them. They must have been so sad... But I never felt as if I had anything in common with them, really. There were just a bunch of ancient travelers with muddy skin and horrible, tiny little eyes—”

“ ‘Muddy skin and horrible, tiny little eyes.’ Thank you very much,” muttered Franck.

Tay put her hand to her mouth. “I didn’t mean... I mean, you’re not... Sorry!”

Franck grinned. “Don’t worry, I’m not all *that* vain,” he assured her. He laughed out loud at the look on her face.

She was dressed in some of his spare clothes. Being practically naked before hadn’t seemed to bother her, but it was cold in the air after sunset. It was almost dark on deck now, except for the eerie glow that came from her face and hands—and feet. Franck had been disappointed to discover she *had* legs and feet. Not a mermaid, after all. But just as fascinating...

“Why *didn’t* anyone try to rescue us?” She turned and was watching him intently now. “I mean, it must have been a huge effort to come all the way out here in the first place, with all that equipment and all those people, and then—how could you just *forget* about us?”

He held up his hands defensively. “It wasn’t me! I didn’t forget—and the people back then didn’t, either. Not really. It was just that the War started right around that time, and well, you know...” It didn’t sound very convincing, he realized.

She frowned. “What war is that?”

Now, *there* was a question! How do you go about explaining the single most important event in the history of the known universe, an event that lasted a century and affected everyone and everything within thousands of light-years, to someone who, bizarrely, completely missed it?

He didn’t know where to begin. The Planets War had come out of the usual murky soup of past greed and need, and had been the only reality for—how many generations was it? Franck grimaced to himself. There were so few habitable worlds to begin with, and they’d still managed to lose too many of them to fire, drought, and radiation. And in the end it was exhaustion, more than anything else, that saved the day. Humanity had worn itself out, kicking

and screaming and breaking its toys like a crossed toddler, until it ran out of breath.

All that destruction, all those lives lost—it wasn't something you wanted to dwell on. You couldn't—not and stay sane. Anyway, it was over now.

But what would somebody like Tay think of it all? What would she think of *him*, coming from a background like that? Suddenly he didn't want to tell her about the War, or about anything bad. He wanted to *impress* her, more than he liked to admit.

He shrugged off her question and countered with one of his own.

“Why didn't you refloat the escape pods when you realized you were going to have to stay? Wouldn't it have been easier to live on the surface? There's *air* up here, for one thing!”

Tay shook her head. “Not possible. You can't tell much from *this*”—and she indicated the gently roll of the water with a contemptuous flick of her hand. “You've just been lucky, landing in the quiet season. Tsunami season is another thing altogether. You and your little boat wouldn't have lasted a minute.”

Franck gaped. “What do you *mean*, 'little boat'? I'll have you know this craft is the result of *years* of better technology than *you'd* understand!”

Tay just looked at him. “Sixty seconds,” she said flatly.

“I bet it can stand up to any conditions you care to throw at it!”

Tay shrugged. “Maybe thirty seconds,” she murmured.

Just then the evening wind picked up, and the waves started to get choppier. The craft lurched a little.

Franck looked about. “So when does this tsunami season kick in?” he asked, trying to sound casual.

Tay frowned. “What day is today?” she asked.

Franck noticed she actually sounded worried, and his stomach went strange. “Uh, Tuesday,” he said.

Tay reached over suddenly and grabbed his wrist. Her huge eyes became enormous, ringed right round with white. Her alien, silver-blue face was close to his.

“Are you *sure*? Are you sure it's *Tuesday*?”

Franck could only nod, his throat too tight for speech. He was horribly aware of the wind, much stronger now, and the way the boat was wobbling.

“Oh well, then if it's Tuesday, I'd say we've got about three months,” said Tay, and she grinned.

“Why, you rotten little—” Franck dragged his arm away from her and rubbed at where her grip had left marks. “I ought to throw you overboard!”

“Ooooooh. Scary!”

He had to laugh.

They sat together in the bobbing silence for a while. Franck felt himself filling up with a new feeling. A feeling of contentment. He stole a look across at her, and then another. It was so strange. He could have sworn he’d been perfectly happy before she landed on his deck. He’d loved his work, his life. He hadn’t been lonely, not a bit. And now...

Now the thought that she might disappear back under the waves, that he might not see her again, was unbearable. Don’t be stupid, he told himself. She’s got an entire life down there. What on Earth makes you think *you* could have any place in it? “What on Earth”—listen to yourself—she wouldn’t even say that. She’d say, “What on Rannoch,” or maybe something completely weird. You have *nothing* in common.

All the contentment was gone now. He felt tight inside and unreasonably angry. He jumped up and went over to the railing. “So what are you going to do?” he said, too loud, too rough.

She looked surprised. “What?”

Franck tried to make his voice lighter. “I mean, what were you in the middle of, when my net so rudely interrupted you? Were you at school, or what?”

“School? I’m too old for school! No. No, I wasn’t in the Enclosure at all. I’m not sure your net would even go that deep.”

“The Enclosure?”

“Where we live. It’s right down at the sea floor, near the thermal vent.” She grinned at him and shivered a little. “It’s a lot warmer there, I can tell you.”

He leaned on one elbow, still at the railing, still keeping a distance between them.

“So what were you doing, away from the warmth?” he asked.

Her eyes slid past him, and she stared out over the surface of the sea. “I’d had a fight with my parents,” she said quietly. “I’d left.”

“For *good*?”

Tay shrugged. “Of course not. Where could I go? I don’t know. I was... fed up. It was like everything was just too *small*.” She sounded bleak.

Franck took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Then he came back to sit close beside her on the deck.

“I don’t know,” he said after a while, “But it seem to me what you’ve got down there is anything but small. It’s amazing how you found a way to make it work so that all those people could be born and grow up and have babies and

die in peace. Something to be *proud* of.” He shoved her with his shoulder. “Biggest thing the rest of us managed was the Planets War!”

Tay was still for a minute. Then she nodded.

“You’re right, in a way,” she said. “It *is* impressive. And I *am* proud, really, if I think about it like that. But...”

“But it wasn’t enough?” Franck prompted carefully. “You were looking for something? In search of...?”

“In search of...,” murmured Tay. Then she turned to him and grinned. “That just about covers it. In search of!”

They were quiet again, companionably. He watched her. Even in his old clothes, she looked good. Those enormous eyes—and the way her skin and hair glowed, a silvery blue luminescence in the night.

She’s beautiful, he thought. Fabulous. And completely, utterly alien. I joined Surveying to see what strange wonders the universe could come up with, and the strangest, most wonderful thing I’ve found is another human.

“So what are you going to do?” he asked again, gently this time. What were *any* of them going to do? This new world of human miracles—how would Tay’s people fit into the mess the rest of the universe had made of things? Would they even *want* to be rescued? He had to know. “Tay?”

Tay didn’t answer. She might not have heard. She just sat there, hugging her knees, smiling at a break in the clouds and its glimpse of stars.

He was leaning toward her when he sensed movement in the water, just out of the corner of his eye. He leaped to his feet and spun on his heel in a circle. All around the craft were round silvery heads, bobbing up and down in the dark water.

He gave a whoop of delight and cried, “Seals!”

Then one of them shot him.

As the fire in his chest spread, Franck slid gracelessly to the deck. He found he couldn’t move, couldn’t see. He could still hear, though, through the strange buzz in his ears.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he heard Tay scream. Her alien accent was stronger than before.

“We’re here to rescue you!” This from a voice he didn’t recognize.

“Don’t be stupid—that’s what *he’s* here for!” That was Tay again. “I don’t need...,” she was continuing, when the buzzing darkness flooded over him, and he knew no more.

When Franck came to, he was alone, and the first light of dawn was tingeing the clouds. His craft swayed gently.

Not dead, he thought dully. I'm not dead.

He felt sick and cold and he hurt all over. He got to his feet with a groan.

No blood on the deck. It must have been some kind of energy gun Tay's people had used on him, then.

I hope she's all right. He shook his head, trying to think clearly. Don't be stupid—they're not going to shoot *her!*

He staggered into the cabin to find that his communications board had gone mad. As soon as he pressed one of the wildly flashing displays, a voice filled the tiny room.

“—able 5. This is the *Nova Scotia*. Come in, Landable 5—”

Franck winced and pawed at the volume control. Then he reached across to flick another switch. “Landable 5 here,” he said rubbing hard at his forehead.

The voice sounded relieved and cross at the same time. “Thank goodness! Where have you *been*, Landable 5? You should have reported in *hours* ago—”

Franck broke in on the lecture. “*Nova Scotia*, I have something to report *now*. I'm sending recorded material, but I think you had better wake up the captain...”

The process of uploading his data-to-date was the work of a moment; what took time was explaining to the *Nova Scotia's* captain about Tay, the *Macmillan* survivors, and everything he'd learned about starship-eating solar flares.

“The amount of energy they pack is phenomenal, Captain. Down here their arrival effectively scrambles Rannoch's magnetic field, causing earthquakes and sea surges unimaginable on Earth. But in *space*, with no atmospheric protection, it must be like hitting an invisible brick wall...”

When he finally finished his report, there was a tense pause, and a scurry of voices in the background, before the captain replied.

“There's a problem, Landable 5,” she said at last. “Due to the orbit of your planet and the trajectory of our—”

“You're too far away.” He'd already figured that out.

He heard the captain sigh.

“So it's a choice between getting me off or getting the *Nova Scotia* safely out of range of the solar flares. Not much of a contest, Captain, is it?”

She had no real choice, but he had to work to convince her, anyway.

Now all I have to do is convince myself, he thought as he switched off the Communications board and adjusted the autonavigator.

He wanted to go up on deck, to scan the sea for any sign of Tay's people. Were they just going to forget about him? Or would they be coming back to finish him off? Tay—was she going to abandon him? Would he see her again?

But when he tried to climb the steps, his knees gave out. “Three months before tsunami season,” he muttered to himself. “Three months...”

He crawled over to his bunk and dragged himself up into it. As his head met the pillow, he heard someone enter the cabin. For a long moment, he was afraid to look. Then...

“Get yourself a towel, girl,” he said. “You’re dripping all over my floor.”
Just before his eyes closed in sleep, he saw her smile.

Officer Perth turned to the new recruit.

“Ensign, check the Com.”

The *Nova Scotia*, returned at last after more than two years, had immediately sent a full-crew landing craft down to the surface. The ensign flicked a switch on the communications board, and a continuous message blared through the cabin.

“Calling Landable 5. Calling Landable 5. Come in, S. Franck. Surveyor Franck, can you read me? Calling—”

“O.K., turn it off.” Officer Perth sighed and returned to scanning the horizon.

The ensign looked at this friend, equally young and raw, working at the next monitor.

“It’s been well over two years,” he whispered. “They can’t seriously expect the guy to still be alive. I mean, that’s two sets of flare disturbance he’d have had to survive. Have you *seen* the computer simulations they cooked up from the data? The surface of this place goes like a giant Jacuzzi!” He made a thumbs-down gesture and shook his head.

Officer Perth closed his ears to their gossiping. Franck was just a name to them, a bit of history; there were recruited well after he’d been left to die on this wasteland. Wasteland! If only there were any land. Perth was up to his eyeballs in seasickness pills, but that didn’t make him like the endless heaving vista any better. Everywhere he looked, it was gray, it was wet, and it wouldn’t keep still—

“Sir? Sir! There’s something big heading our way!”

Officer Perth stared around wildly at the horizon, but the ensign called again.

“No, sir, not out there. Down *there*. It’s coming up beneath us, sir, and it’s coming up fast.”

Perth peered over the boy's should at the monitor and tried not to gasp. "Weapons on line, Ensign. And you, get me a readout on indigenous predators—the *big* ones. What do we have that matches... *that?*"

"Too late, sir—it's closing!"

"Rising on the port bow, sir! Do I fire, sir?"

"NO!" bellowed Perth. "Not yet..."

They could see it now, a spreading blackness that curved the surface of the sea like a dark bubble. The thing was as big as their landing craft. They could hear a sinister crackling coming from it, as if electricity were discharging from its hide into the air. And then it broke clear of the surface and settled—not an animal after all, but an alien craft. What showed above water was like a translucent turtle shell or the hardened bell shape of a jellyfish. They peered, open-mouthed—was there movement inside the dome? Then, with a hiss, it split lengthways, the upper halves sliding round to form a second hull. And there *was* something on its deck...

More or less naked, with an odd gill-like slit in the front of its throat and the long-muscle body of a swimmer, it—*he*—dived into the sea and powered across to them.

"A ... *merman?*" breathed Officer Perth, awe-struck.

The merman gave a cheerful wave from the water and started to clamber up on deck. "Hey, guys!" he said. "Franck here. What kept you?"

"FRANCK?"

There was a stunned silence as Franck vaulted over the railing. "Perth, my old mate!" He flicked his long, wet hair back from his face and looked about eagerly. "Got any coffee? Who are the new boys? Ensign?"

"Y-yes, sir?"

"Coffee all round." He thumped Perth enthusiastically on the arm as the ensign scurried below deck. "This is a celebration!"

Officer Perth was having trouble catching his breath. With a brain full of questions, it was hard to know where to start. His gaze landed on Franck's craft.

"*That's,*" Perth pointed, "that's Landable 5?"

Franck grinned. "We turned it into a submersible—good, eh? Then we worked out an underwater anchorage, pretty much midway between the Surface and the Enclosure. That was low enough to escape the worst of the tsunami disturbance, but not so low that the pressure would crush the craft. Electrifying the hull was just an extension of what they already do the

Perimeter—they tune it to the frequency of the major big predators’ electrosensors, and hey presto! no unwelcome visitors with sharp, pointy teeth.

“We? You had help?”

Franck gulped appreciatively at the hot mug he’d been handed. “You wouldn’t even be talking to tiny bits of me if I’d been on my own. I owe everything to the people here. Perth, there’s so much—you wouldn’t believe...”

Franck shook his head, remembering.

“It hasn’t been easy to find my place here.” He grinned and rubbed his chest ruefully. “Pretty much the first thing they did was shoot me! They assumed I was some kind of grisly alien. And it didn’t get a whole lot friendlier when they realized I was human.” He lowered his voice. “Rannoch’s people had no reason to trust the universe we’ve come from. Some of them were sure we’d be sending in anthropologists to study them like freaks. Some of them figured it was the end of everything they’d ever achieved. As soon as the rest of the universe got here, they’d be knee-deep in overpopulation, pollution, overfishing, crime... It took me ages to convince them that Galactic Law would protect them. It’s their planet. They’re in control. And, Perth—they have so much to offer! The things they know how to do!”

He leaned forward.

“It’s only since the modifications,” and he pointed almost shyly to his throat vent, “this and the blood adjustments, that I’ve been able to *see* what they’ve achieved. It’s ...” Franck waved his hands about, lost for words.

“It’s a lifetime’s work,” he said, eyes shining, “to learn what Rannoch has to teach!”

Then, unexpectedly, Franck laughed. “Speaking of work,” he smiled slyly, “after two years of not showing up, I guess I can consider myself well and truly fired. But still, I’d hate to think of you being short-handed because of me. So I’ve found you a volunteer.”

He leaned casually over the railing and banged the side of the craft twice. At once air bubbles began to come to the surface, and a shape could be seen rising from the depths.

“Allow me to introduce the first Rannoch recruit, Acting Ensign... Tay!”

She exploded out of the water like a leaping dolphin, did a handstand over the railing, and landed on the deck silvery feet first and grinning hopefully. The crew gasped as cold seawater splashed over them all... and then they stared.

Officer Perth cleared his throat. “Perhaps we should find the ensign a uniform,” he murmured.

Time passed, and the universe continued to surprise, until one day...

“Katrine, be *reasonable*! You are not old enough to leave home!” said her father.

“Fyne’s going off-planet next quiet season! And Stenness, too!”

“That’s right. And that’s because Fyne is *how* old? And Stenness?” said her mother.

“Oh, great. Now you’re trying to use *facts* against me. It’s not fair!” Katrine wailed.

“It *will* be. The tsunami season after this, you’ll be—,” began her mother.

“Agghhh! Do you have *any idea* how long that is?”

“Well, yes, actually, it’s fourteen months and three days...,” started her father.

But she’d stopped listening. With a frustrated cry, the girl slammed a breather into her throat and, with unconscious grace, dived, disappearing under the choppy waves.

For a moment, Tay and Franck stood there, looking at each other. They let out their breath in a *phew*.

“We should have called her Gale,” murmured Tay, but her husband was distracted.

“Wind’s getting up,” he said. “It won’t be long until we’ll be needing to submerge. Should I go after her?”

Tay shook her head.

“No, Franck,” she said. “Leave her be. She’ll be back. And you know...,” she looked up at him with a smile, “I remember feeling just the same.”